

Doctor Cicero

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If we look closely at Cicero's metaphors in his speeches against Catiline, we can see that the orator casts himself as a doctor curing the city of the pestilence represented by his opponent. Cicero wrote his speech at a time of heightened interest in medicine and medical imagery.

In a famous poem (76), Catullus calls upon the gods to remove from him the obsessive love that is creeping like a paralysis through his limbs. The terms he uses to describe the obsession are 'pestilence' (in Latin, *pestis*) and 'destruction' (*perniciēs*). These words resonate with a pounding insistence throughout Cicero's first speech against Catiline: together with the adjective 'destructive' (*perniciosus*) they come up 13 times, and the two nouns are found together once, as in Catullus, with the same explosive alliteration. While *perniciēs* (which suggests a physical destruction or its source) has no direct link with the idea of sickness, *pestis* can suggest plague as well as physical destruction, death. And it is tempting to believe that, like Catullus, Cicero plays on these medical associations. For example, he says at one point that if Catiline alone is killed, 'this plague (*pestem*) can be checked [another medical word!] for a little, not eliminated for ever'. The invocation of medical imagery is made the more likely by the fact that Cicero uses the word *salus*, which can mean 'health' as well as 'safety', eight times in the speech.

Two paragraphs later, Cicero brings the medical imagery out into the open. He says that if Catiline alone is killed and his co-conspirators are not dealt with, the danger will remain deep in the veins and innards of the republic. He continues with a significant simile:

As often happens when men are sick with a serious disease and toss this way and that in the heat of their fever, if they drink cold water, they gain relief at first but then are much more seriously and acutely distressed – in the same way this disease which afflicts the republic will be relieved by his punishment but will grow more serious while the rest are still alive.

What Cicero is up to here becomes totally clear in his second speech against Catiline when he says:

One way or another I shall cure what can be cured and I shall not allow what needs to be cut out to remain to bring destruction (perniciem) on the state.

The vigilant consul sees himself as a surgeon determined to operate on the state and cut out a cancerous growth.

But Cicero visualizes himself not only as a surgeon. He has another medical skill. He wants the city to be purged, and he believes that if Catiline and his supporters depart, it will be. 'Lead out all your men with you, or if not all, as many as possible. Purge the city.' If Catiline leaves, his accomplices, a flood of deadly (*perniciosa*) bilge water, will be drained from the city. Catiline's departure here is characterized as the flushing of a sewer. Hygienic and medical imagery combine. (Another thirty years had to pass, incidentally, before Rome's literal sewer system was cleaned out.) Near the start of his second speech against Catiline, Cicero says that the city seems to be rejoicing because it has sicked up so great a pestilence (*pestem*): medical theory recommended vomiting if anything corrupt had been ingested. The idea recurs, possibly with the same image, a little later, when he counts the state happy because it has thrown out (or perhaps 'vomited up') the city's bilge water. In driving out Catiline and some of his cronies, Cicero has administered an effective emetic to the city. His medical skill is not confined to surgery.

A notable feature of Cicero's speech is its emphasis on words for walls. He wants Catiline to be outside them. *Paries* is the word for the wall of a house. Within such walls Catiline has hatched his conspiracy; Cicero has refused to have him in his house living within the same walls (*parietibus*). The words for the city walls (*muri*, *moenia*) occur five times in the speech. An urgent accumulation of imperatives demands that Catiline should quit them. After all, we are told, the gates are open. Cicero assures him that he (Catiline)

would free him from great fear if there were a wall between the two of them. If we are correct in finding a controlling medical metaphor in the speaker's rhetoric, we may well feel that it combines with its insistence on walls to suggest that he wishes to drive an infection, a foul, terrifying and deadly pestilence (*pestem*) from the city. About this time Lucretius rendered in supremely powerful Latin poetry Thucydides' account of the horrific plague which raged at Athens at the beginning of the Peloponnesian war when the whole population of Attica was forced inside its walls. Such a plague must not ravage Rome. Catiline is utterly vile, a brigand, a gladiator, a corrupter of the young, the killer of his wife and son. He is an infection, a bacillus, that must be isolated, as he has been in the temple where the senate is meeting (16), and then expelled. But only if all of his criminal associates leave with him can the city be fully purged. Only then can the doctor Cicero bring about a full cure.

Cicero paints his enemy in the most grisly colours. He is the embodiment of 'frenzy', that uncontrollably disruptive force to which Virgil was soon to give unforgettable expression in the *Aeneid*. Pitting himself against civilized order, he wants to burn the city down (when in reality he may at the most have planned small fires to cause terror and confusion). The most memorable weapon in Cicero's armoury, however, is his portrayal of Catiline as a creature of the night. It was last night and the night before that he and the other conspirators had met to formulate their plans. He intended to seize Praeneste in a night attack. He arranged that Cicero should be killed at night, a little before dawn. But Cicero's light has conquered Catiline's darkness. Night cannot keep dark his criminal meetings for the eyes and ears of the pious consul have been open. They have ensured that all of Catiline's dark plans are now clearer than daylight. How can this skulking denizen of the night take any pleasure in the light of the sun?

Cicero thus establishes his own persona as far more than that of a doctor. He is the man of 'piety', the vigilant agent of light and the day. The voice of the senate (well, of a lot of it), he is supremely articulate, while Catiline (Cicero tells us) sits in the temple isolated and for the most part silent

(although it should be said that he is said at one point to protest verbally, and that he gave a speech in answer to the attack). Cicero's rhetorical achievement is indeed dazzling. As a 'new man' (the first member of his family to become consul), he is talking to an assembly many of whose members would have felt that he was 'not one of us'; their cosy sense of superiority is reflected in the fact that in his reply, though Cicero came from a town only 70 miles from Rome, Catiline called him an immigrant! Cicero, however, succeeds in identifying himself with the good, patriotic men of the senate and in making *Catiline* the outsider. But his flood of words reflects the fact that the figurative structures he has built to blacken Catiline and glorify himself are the products of rhetoric and do not necessarily correspond to the reality of the situation. That may be rather different!

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